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**Title:** Detecting Reference Errors Before Publication

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When conducting research, I have become increasingly frustrated by citation and quotation errors. For example, in a recently published book chapter, the author summarized a research study but cited a paper from a completely different study. This same author made citation errors within the reference list and obviously gleaned data from a secondary source without reading the original paper. As a result, I questioned the accuracy of the entire chapter.

Reference errors are not innocuous. Reference and quotation errors prolong the time needed to find a reference, damage an author's reputation, weaken a journal's credibility, disrespect the primary paper's author(s), and undermine clinical and research nursing literature. Furthermore, authors promulgate errors when they copy an inaccurate citation without verifying its content with the primary source.

Regrettably, investigators have confirmed my observations that reference errors are prevalent in nursing literature. Foreman and Kirchhoff (1987) were the first nurses to study the accuracy of reference citations. Using the lead article from the final 1983 issue of 65 clinical journal and 47 non-clinical journals, these investigators evaluated randomly selected references for accuracy. Reference errors occurred in 38.4% of the clinical journals and in 21.3% of the non-clinical journals. Schulmeister (1998) evaluated 60 published papers from three nursing journals and reported that 32% of 180 references contained citation errors. In a similar study of 262 references that were cited in three nursing research journals, Taylor (1998) reported an overall citation error rate of 45.8%. More recently, Lok, Chan, and Martinson (2001) reported that 43% of 550 references from 11 nursing journals contained citation errors. Results from the same study also indicated that single authorship, lengthy reference lists, and the journal's impact factor

and immediacy index predicted the occurrence of minor citation errors. When evaluating individual components of citations, McLellan, Case, and Barnett (1992) found that the article title was most often inaccurate, followed by author name, page numbers, journal title, volume number, and year.

As a manuscript reviewer, I now use a database such as CINAHL or MEDLINE to spot-check references. I have yet to review a paper that did not contain multiple and major reference errors. However, a disadvantage of this approach is that it is tedious and time-consuming for editors and reviewers to check the accuracy of every reference.

While each author is ultimately responsible to ensure that the reference citations are correct, nurse editors and reviewers can use the following straightforward strategies to detect errors before publication:

- Evaluate the paper's title to ensure that it is complete. Ideally, reviewers will be familiar with the paper's topic and will recognize many of its references.
- Look for irregularities within the list of authors. At the minimum, there should be a last name and first initial for each listed author.
- Examine the page numbers for obvious errors.
- Review the journal's title for accuracy. Most reviewers are well versed with commonly referenced journals.
- Note the journal's volume number and, if applicable, the issue number. Based on your knowledge of the journal, assess whether the numbers are logical.
- Ensure that the year is included.
- Use a database to check references that you suspect are incorrect.

**Try It!**

Apply the above strategies as you review the fictitious citations that follow. Mark the errors that you find and compare your work with the accurate citations at the end of the article.

McGee, D. (2020). New antimicrobial drug associated with side effects serious. *American Journal of Infection Control*, 30, 402-406.

Harrison, Webb, M. A., & White, D. L. (2003). Controversies abound with the release of new hypertension guidelines. *JAMA*, 28, 600-611.

Knight, D. L., & Hodges, X. X. Surviving the merger of two intensive car units. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 15, 129-122.

Robbins, P. J. (2001). Chronic fatigue syndrome. *American Nursing Journal*, 101(11), 99.

Lisa, K. (2003). Logical empiricist theories of nursing. *Nursing 2003*, 33(3), 35-49.

## References

Foreman, M. D., & Kirchhoff, K. T. (1987). Accuracy of references in nursing journals. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 10, 177-183.

Lok, C. K., Chan, M. T., & Martinson, I. M. (2001). Risk factors for citation errors in peer-reviewed nursing journals. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 34, 223-229.

McLellan, M. F., Case, L. D., & Barnett, M. C. (1992). Trust, but verify: The accuracy of references in four anesthesia journals. *Anesthesiology*, 77, 185-188.

Schulmeister, L. (1998). Quotation and reference accuracy of three nursing journals. *Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 30, 143-146.

Taylor, M. K. (1998). The practical effects of errors in reference lists in nursing

research journals. *Nursing Research*, 47, 300-303.

### **Corrected Citations and Comments**

McGee, D. (2002). New antimicrobial drug associated with **serious** side effects. *American Journal of Infection Control*, 30, 402-406.

On a quick glance, this citation may appear correct; however, note the obvious date error and misplaced word in the title.

**Harrison A. L**, Webb, M. A., & White, D. L. (2003). Controversies abound with the release of new hypertension guidelines. *JAMA*, 289, 600-611.

Although it is easy to notice the missing author initials, the volume number is a subtle error. Experienced editors and reviewers will know that JAMA is a long-standing journal and conclude that the volume number of 28 must be incorrect.

Knight, D. L., & Hodges, T. S. Surviving the merger of two intensive **care** units. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 15, 122-129.

Be suspicious of Xs; some authors type Xs to remind themselves to add the appropriate content. While a spell checker would have prompted the author to correct Clinical Nusre, it would not identify car as an error. A thorough editor or reviewer will note the reversed page order.

Robbins, P. J. (2001). Chronic fatigue syndrome. *American Journal of Nursing*, 101(11), 99-104.

Experienced editors and reviewers will know that American Nursing Journal does not exist. Take time to ensure that the author(s) included all page numbers.

**Klein, L.** (2003). Logical empiricist theories of nursing. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 33(3), 35-49.

Editors and reviewers should suspect an author error because Lisa is a more common first name than last name. The journal title error is difficult to detect; however, most editors and reviewers will remember that this topic is not typically published in *Nursing 2003*.